

In 1851 Queen Victoria opened the Great Exhibition of the Industries of All Nations inside the Crystal Palace, in London. The exhibition aimed to show the world the greatness of Britain's industry. No other nation could produce as much at that time. At the end of the eighteenth century, France had produced more iron than Britain. By 1850 Britain was producing more iron than the rest of the world together.

Britain had become powerful because it had enough coal, iron and steel for its own enormous industry, and could even export them in large quantities to Europe. With these materials it could produce new heavy industrial goods like iron ships and steam engines. It could also make machinery which produced traditional goods like woollen and cotton cloth in the factories of Lancashire. Britain's cloth was cheap and was exported to India, to other colonies and throughout the Middle East, where it quickly destroyed the local cloth industry, causing great misery. Britain made and owned more than half the world's total shipping. This great industrial empire was supported by a strong banking system developed during the eighteenth century.

## The railway

The greatest example of Britain's industrial power in the mid-nineteenth century was its railway system. Indeed, it was mainly because of this new form of transport that six million people were able to visit the Great Exhibition, 109,000 of them on one day. Many of them had never visited London

before. As one newspaper wrote, "How few among the last generation ever stirred beyond their own villages. How few of the present will die without visiting London." It was impossible for political reform not to continue once everyone could escape localism and travel all over the country with such ease.

In fact industrialists had built the railways to transport goods, not people, in order to bring down the cost of transport. By 1840 2,400 miles of track had been laid, connecting not only the industrial towns of the north, but also London, Birmingham and even an economically unimportant town like Brighton. By 1870 the railway system of Britain was almost complete. The canals were soon empty as everything went by rail. The speed of the railway even made possible the delivery of fresh fish and raspberries from Scotland to London in one night.

In 1851 the government made the railway companies provide passenger trains which stopped at all stations for a fare of one penny per mile. Now people could move about much more quickly and easily.

The middle classes soon took advantage of the new opportunity to live in suburbs, from which they travelled into the city every day by train. The suburb was a copy of the country village with all the advantages of the town. Most of the London area was built very rapidly between 1850 and 1880 in response to the enormous demand for a home in the suburbs.

Poor people's lives also benefited by the railway. Many moved with the middle classes to the suburbs, into smaller houses. The men travelled by train to work in the town. Many of the women became servants in the houses of the middle classes. By 1850 16 per cent of the population were "in service" in private homes, more than were in farming or in the cloth industry.

## The rise of the middle classes

There had been a "middle class" in Britain for hundreds of years. It was a small class of merchants, traders and small farmers. In the second half of the eighteenth century it had increased with the rise of industrialists and factory owners.

In the nineteenth century, however, the middle class grew more quickly than ever before and included greater differences of wealth, social position and kinds of work. It included those who worked in the professions, such as the Church, the law, medicine, the civil service, the diplomatic service, merchant banking and the army and the navy.



It also included the commercial classes, however, who were the real creators of wealth in the country. Industrialists were often "self-made" men who came from poor beginnings. They believed in hard work, a regular style of life and being careful with money. This class included both the very successful and rich industrialists and the small shopkeepers and office workers of the growing towns and suburbs.

In spite of the idea of "class", the Victorian age was a time of great social movement. The children of the first generation of factory owners often preferred commerce and banking to industry. While their fathers remained Nonconformist and Liberal, some children became Anglican and Tory. Some went into the professions. The very successful received knighthoods or became lords and joined the ranks of the upper classes.

Those of the middle class who could afford it sent their sons to fee-paying "public" schools. These schools aimed not only to give boys a good education, but to train them in leadership by taking them away from home and making their living conditions hard. These public schools provided many of the officers for the armed forces, the colonial administration and the civil service.

## The growth of towns and cities

The escape of the middle classes to the suburbs was understandable. The cities and towns were overcrowded and unhealthy. One baby in four died within a year of its birth. In 1832 an outbreak of cholera, a disease spread by dirty water, killed 31,000 people. Proper drains and water supplies were still limited to those who could afford them.

In the middle of the century towns began to appoint health officers and to provide proper drains and clean water, which quickly reduced the level of disease, particularly cholera. These health officers also tried to make sure that new housing was less crowded. Even so, there were many "slum" areas for factory workers, where tiny homes were built very close together. The better town councils provided parks in newly built areas, as well as libraries, public baths where people could wash, and even concert halls.

Some towns grew very fast. In the north, for example, Middlesbrough grew from nothing to an iron and steel town of 150,000 people in only fifty years. Most people did not own their homes, but rented them. The homes of the workers usually had

only four small rooms, two upstairs and two downstairs, with a small back yard. Most of the middle classes lived in houses with a small garden in front, and a larger one at the back.

## Population and politics

In 1851, an official population survey was carried out for the first time. It showed that the nation was not as religious as its people had believed. Only 60 per cent of the population went to church. The survey also showed that of these only 5.2 million called themselves Anglicans, compared with 4.5 million Nonconformists and almost half a million Catholics. Changes in the law, in 1828 and 1829, made it possible, for the first time since the seventeenth century, for Catholics and Nonconformists to enter government service and to enter Parliament. In practice, however, it remained difficult for them to do so. The Tory–Anglican alliance could hardly keep them out any longer. But the Nonconformists naturally supported the Liberals, the more reformist party. In fact the Tories held office for less than five years between 1846 and 1874.

In 1846, when Sir Robert Peel had fallen from power, the shape of British politics was still unclear. Peel was a Tory, and many Tories felt that his repeal of the Corn Laws that year was a betrayal of Tory beliefs. Peel had already made himself very unpopular by supporting the right of Catholics to enter Parliament in 1829. But Peel was a true representative of the style of politics at the time. Like other politicians he acted independently, in spite of his party membership. One reason for this was the number of crises in British politics for a whole generation after 1815. Those in power found they often had to avoid dangerous political, economic or social situations by taking steps they themselves would have preferred not to take. This was the case with Peel. He did not wish to see Catholics in Parliament, but he was forced to let them in. He did not wish to repeal the Corn Laws because these served the farming interests of the Tory landowning class, but he had to accept that the power of the manufacturing middle class was growing greater than that of the landed Tory gentry.

Peel's actions were also evidence of a growing acceptance by both Tories and Whigs of the



economic need for free trade, as well as the need for social and political reform to allow the middle class to grow richer and to expand. This meant allowing a freer and more open society, with all the dangers that might mean. It also meant encouraging a freer and more open society in the countries with which Britain hoped to trade. This was "Liberalism", and the Whigs, who were generally more willing to advance these ideas, became known as Liberals.

Some Tories also pursued essentially "Liberal" policy. In 1823, for example, the Tory Foreign Secretary, Lord Canning, used the navy to prevent Spain sending troops to her rebellious colonies in South America. The British were glad to see the liberation movement led by Simon Bolivar succeed. However, this was partly for an economic reason. Spain had prevented Britain's free trade with Spanish colonies since the days of Drake.

Canning had also been responsible for helping the Greeks achieve their freedom from the Turkish empire. He did this partly in order to satisfy romantic liberalism in Britain, which supported Greek freedom mainly as a result of the influence of the great poet of the time, Lord Byron, who had visited Greece. But Canning also knew that Russia, like Greece an orthodox Christian country, might

use the excuse of Turkish misrule to take control of Greece itself. Canning judged correctly that an independent Greece would be a more effective check to Russian expansion.

From 1846 until 1865 the most important political figure was Lord Palmerston, described by one historian as "the most characteristically mid-Victorian statesman of all." He was a Liberal, but like Peel he often went against his own party's ideas and values. Palmerston was known for liberalism in his foreign policy. He strongly believed that despotic states discouraged free trade, and he openly supported European liberal and independence movements. In 1859–60, for example, Palmerston successfully supported the Italian independence movement against both Austrian and French interests. Within Britain, however, Palmerston was a good deal less liberal, and did not want to allow further political reform to take place. This was not totally surprising, since he had been a Tory as a young man under Canning and had joined the Whigs at the time of the 1832 Reform Bill. It was also typical of the confusing individualism of politics that the Liberal Lord Palmerston was invited to join a Tory government in 1852.



After Palmerston's death in 1865 a much stricter "two party" system developed, demanding greater loyalty from its membership. The two parties, Tory (or Conservative as it became officially known) and Liberal, developed greater party organisation and order. There was also a change in the kind of men who became political leaders. This was a result of the Reform of 1832, after which a much larger number of people could vote. These new voters chose a different kind of MP, men from the commercial rather than the landowning class.

Gladstone, the new Liberal leader, had been a factory owner. He had also started his political life as a Tory. Even more surprisingly Benjamin Disraeli, the new Conservative leader, was of Jewish origin. In 1860 Jews were for the first time given equal rights with other citizens. Disraeli had led the Tory attack on Peel in 1846, and brought down his government. At that time Disraeli had strongly supported the interests of the landed gentry. Twenty years later Disraeli himself changed the outlook of the Conservative Party, deliberately increasing the party's support among the middle class. Since 1881 the Conservative Party has generally remained the strongest.

Much of what we know today as the modern state was built in the 1860s and 1870s. Between 1867 and 1884 the number of voters increased from 20 per cent to 60 per cent of men in towns and to 70 per cent in the country, including some of the working class. One immediate effect was the rapid growth in party organisation, with branches in every town, able to organise things locally. In 1872 voting was carried out in secret for the first time, allowing ordinary people to vote freely and without fear. This, and the growth of the newspaper industry, in particular "popular" newspapers for the new half-educated population, strengthened the importance of popular opinion. Democracy grew quickly. A national political pattern appeared. England, particularly the south, was more conservative, while Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the north of England appeared more radical. This pattern has generally continued since then. The House of Commons grew in size to over 650 members, and the House of Lords lost the powerful

position it had held in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Now it no longer formed policy but tried to prevent reform taking place through the House of Commons.

Democracy also grew rapidly outside Parliament. In 1844 a "Co-operative Movement" was started by a few Chartists and trade unionists. Its purpose was self-help, through a network of shops which sold goods at a fair and low price, and which shared all its profits among its members. It was very successful, with 150 Co-operative stores by 1851 in the north of England and Scotland. By 1889 it had over 800,000 members. Co-operative self-help was a powerful way in which the working class gained self-confidence in spite of its weak position.

After 1850 a number of trade unions grew up, based on particular kinds of skilled labour. However, unlike many European worker struggles, the English trade unions sought to achieve their goals through parliamentary democracy. In 1868 the first congress of trade unions met in Manchester, representing 118,000 members. The following year the new Trades Union Congress established a parliamentary committee with the purpose of achieving worker representation in Parliament. This wish to work within Parliament rather than outside it had already brought trade unionists into close co-operation with radicals and reformist Liberals. Even the Conservative Party tried to attract worker support. However, there were limits to Conservative and Liberal co-operation. It was one thing to encourage "friendly" societies for the peaceful benefit of workers. It was quite another to encourage union campaigns using strike action. During the 1870s wages were lowered in many factories and this led to more strikes than had been seen in Britain before. The trade unions' mixture of worker struggle and desire to work democratically within Parliament led eventually to the foundation of the Labour Party.

During the same period the machinery of modern government was set up. During the 1850s a regular civil service was established to carry out the work of government, and "civil servants" were carefully chosen after taking an examination. The system



still exists today. The army, too, was reorganised, and from 1870 officers were no longer able to buy their commissions. The administration of the law was reorganised. Local government in towns and counties was reorganised to make sure of good government and proper services for the people. In 1867 the first move was made to introduce free and compulsory education for children. In fact social improvement and political reform acted on each other throughout the century to change the face of the nation almost beyond recognition.

## Queen and monarchy

Queen Victoria came to the throne as a young woman in 1837 and reigned until her death in 1901. She did not like the way in which power seemed to be slipping so quickly away from the monarchy and aristocracy, but like her advisers she was unable to prevent it. Victoria married a German, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg, but he died at the age of forty-two in 1861. She could not get over her sorrow at his death, and for a long time refused to be seen in public.

This was a dangerous thing to do. Newspapers began to criticise her, and some even questioned the value of the monarchy. Many radicals actually believed the end of monarchy was bound to happen as a result of democracy. Most had no wish to hurry this process, and were happy to let the monarchy die naturally. However, the queen's advisers persuaded her to take a more public interest in the business of the kingdom. She did so, and she soon became extraordinarily popular. By the time Victoria died the monarchy was better loved among the British than it had ever been before.

One important step back to popularity was the publication in 1868 of the queen's book *Our life in the Highlands*. The book was the queen's own diary, with drawings, of her life with Prince Albert at Balmoral, her castle in the Scottish Highlands. It delighted the public, in particular the growing middle class. They had never before known anything of the private life of the monarch, and they enjoyed being able to share it. She referred to the Prince Consort simply as "Albert", to the

Prince of Wales as "Bertie", and to the Princess Royal as "Vicky". The queen also wrote about her servants as if they were members of her family.

The increasingly democratic British respected the example of family life which the queen had given them, and shared its moral and religious values. But she also touched people's hearts. She succeeded in showing a newly industrialised nation that the monarchy was a connection with a glorious history. In spite of the efforts of earlier monarchs to stop the spread of democracy, the monarchy was now, quite



suddenly, out of danger. It was never safer than when it had lost most of its political power.

"We have come to believe that it is natural to have a virtuous sovereign," wrote one Victorian. Pure family morality was an idea of royalty that would have been of little interest to the subjects of earlier monarchs.

## Queen and empire

Britain's empire had first been built on trade and the need to defend this against rival European countries. After the loss of the American colonies in 1783, the idea of creating new colonies remained unpopular until the 1830s. Instead, Britain watched the oceans carefully to make sure its trade routes were safe, and fought wars in order to protect its "areas of interest". In 1839 it attacked China and forced it to allow the profitable British trade in opium from India to China. The "Opium Wars" were one of the more shameful events in British colonial history.

After about 1850 Britain was driven more by fear of growing European competition than by commercial need. This led to the taking of land, the creation of colonies, and to colonial wars that were extremely expensive. Fear that Russia would advance southwards towards India resulted in a disastrous war in Afghanistan (1839–42), in which one army was completely destroyed by Afghan forces in the mountains. Soon after, Britain was fighting a war in Sindh, a part of modern Pakistan, then another against Sikhs in the Punjab, in northwest India.

The Russian danger also affected south Europe and the Middle East. Britain feared that Russia would destroy the weak Ottoman Empire, which controlled Turkey and the Arab countries. This would change the balance of power in Europe, and be a danger to Britain's sea and land routes to India. When Russia and Ottoman Turkey went to war Britain joined the Turks against Russia in Crimea in 1854, in order to stop Russian expansion into Asiatic Turkey in the Black Sea area.

It was the first, and last, time that newspapers were able to report freely on a British war without army

control. They told some unwelcome truths; for example, they wrote about the courage of the ordinary soldiers, and the poor quality of their officers. They also reported the shocking conditions in army hospitals, and the remarkable work of the nurse Florence Nightingale.

In India, the unwise treatment of Indian soldiers in British pay resulted in revolt in 1857. Known in Britain as the "Indian Mutiny", this revolt quickly became a national movement against foreign rule, led by a number of Hindu and Muslim princes. Many of these had recently lost power and land to the British rulers. If they had been better organised, they would have been able to throw the British out of India. Both British and Indians behaved with great violence, and the British cruelly punished the defeated rebels. The friendship between the British and the Indians never fully recovered. A feeling of distrust and distance between ruler and ruled grew into the Indian independence movement of the twentieth century.

In Africa, Britain's first interest had been the slave trade on the west coast. It then took over the Cape of Good Hope at the southern point, because it needed a port there to service the sea route to India.

Britain's interest in Africa was increased by reports sent back by European travellers and explorers. The most famous of these was David Livingstone, who was a Scottish doctor, a Christian missionary and an explorer. In many ways, Livingstone was a "man of his age". No one could doubt his courage, or his honesty. His journeys from the east coast into "darkest" Africa excited the British. They greatly admired him. Livingstone discovered areas of Africa unknown to Europeans, and "opened" these areas to Christianity, to European ideas and to European trade.

Christianity too easily became a tool for building a commercial and political empire in Africa. The governments of Europe rushed in to take what they could, using the excuse of bringing "civilisation" to the people. The rush for land became so great that European countries agreed by treaty in 1890 to divide Africa into "areas of interest". By the end of



the century, several European countries had taken over large areas of Africa. Britain succeeded in taking most.

In South Africa Britain found that dealing with other European settlers presented new problems. The Dutch settlers, the Boers, fought two wars against the British at the end of the century, proving again, as the Crimean War had done, the weaknesses of the British army. The Boers were defeated only with great difficulty.

The real problems of British imperial ambition, however, were most obvious in Egypt. Britain, anxious about the safety of the route to India

through the newly dug Suez Canal, bought a large number of shares in the Suez Canal company.

When Egyptian nationalists brought down the ruler in 1882, Britain invaded "to protect international shipping". In fact, it acted to protect its imperial interest, its route to India. Britain told the world its occupation of Egypt was only for a short time, but it did not leave until forced to do so in 1954.

Involvement in Egypt led to invasion and takeover of the Sudan in 1884, a country two-thirds the size of India. Like other powers, Britain found that every area conquered created new dangers which in turn had to be controlled. In all these countries, in



India, Africa and elsewhere, Britain found itself involved in a contradiction between its imperial ambition and the liberal ideas it wished to advance elsewhere. Gladstone's view that "the foreign policy of England should always be inspired by a love of freedom" seemed to have little place in the colonies. In the twentieth century this contradiction was a major reason for the collapse of the empire.

There was another reason for the interest in creating colonies. From the 1830s there had been growing concern at the rapidly increasing

population of Britain. A number of people called for the development of colonies for British settlers as an obvious solution to the problem. As a result, there was marked increase in settlement in Canada, Australia and New Zealand from the 1840s onwards. The settlers arrived to take over the land and to farm it. In all three countries there had been earlier populations. In Canada most of these were pushed westwards, and those not killed became part of the "white" culture. In Australia British settlers killed most of the aboriginal inhabitants, leaving only a few in the central desert areas. In New Zealand the Maori inhabitants suffered less than in either Canada or Australia, although they still lost most of the land.

The white colonies, unlike the others, were soon allowed to govern themselves, and no longer depended on Britain. They still, however, accepted the British monarch as their head of state. The move towards self-government was the result of trouble in Canada in 1837. A new governor, Lord Durham, quickly understood the danger that Canada might follow the other American colonies into independence. His report established the principle of self-government, first for the white colonies, but eventually for all British possessions. It prepared the way from empire to a British "Commonwealth of Nations" in the twentieth century.

By the end of the nineteenth century Britain controlled the oceans and much of the land areas of the world. Most British strongly believed in their right to an empire, and were willing to defend it against the least threat. This state of mind became known as Jingoism, after a famous Music Hall song of 1878:

We don't want to fight, but, by jingo if we do,  
We've got the ships, we've got the men, we've  
got the money too.

But even at this moment of greatest power, Britain had begun to spend more on its empire than it took from it. The empire had started to be a heavy load. It would become impossibly heavy in the twentieth century, when the colonies finally began to demand their freedom.



## Wales, Scotland and Ireland

As industrialisation continued, the areas at the edge of British economic power became weaker. Areas in Wales, Scotland and Ireland were particularly affected.

Wales had fewer problems than either Scotland or Ireland. Its population grew from half a million in 1800 to over two million by 1900, partly because the average expectation of life doubled from thirty to sixty. In south Wales there were rich coal mines which quickly became the centre of a rapidly growing coal and steel industry. In their search for work, a huge number of people, between two-thirds and three-quarters of the total Welsh population, moved into the southeast corner of the country. By 1870 Wales was mainly an industrial society.

This new working-class community, born in southeast Wales, became increasingly interested in Nonconformist Christianity and radicalism. It created its own cultural life. In many mining villages brass bands were created, and these quickly became symbols of working-class unity. Other people joined the local Nonconformist chapel choir, and helped to create the Welsh tradition of fine choral singing. Wales was soon a nation divided between the industrialised areas and the unchanged areas of old Wales, in the centre and north.

The parliamentary reforms of the nineteenth century gave Wales a new voice. As soon as they were allowed to vote, the Welsh workers got rid of the Tories and the landowning families who had represented them for 300 years.

Scotland was also divided between a new industrialised area, around Glasgow and Edinburgh, and the Highland and Lowland areas. Around the two great cities there were coal mines and factories producing steel and iron, as well as the centre of the British shipbuilding industry on the River Clyde. Like Wales, Scotland became strongly Liberal once its workforce gained voting rights.

The clearances in the Highlands continued. In the second half of the century it became more profitable to replace the sheep with wild deer, which were

hunted for sport. Many old clan lands were sold to new landowners who had no previous connection with the Highlands, and who only occasionally visited their estates. The Highlands have never recovered from the collapse of the clan system, either socially or economically. It is probable that the Highland areas would have become depopulated anyway, as people moved away to find work in the cities. But the way in which it happened was not gentle, and left a bitter memory.

The Irish experience was worse than that of Scotland. In the nineteenth century, an increasing number of Protestant Irish turned to England as a protection against the Catholic inhabitants. To the Catholics, however, most Irish Protestants were a reminder that England, a foreign country, was still as powerful in Ireland as it had been in 1690. The struggle for Irish freedom from English rule became a struggle between Catholic and Protestant. The first great victory for Irish freedom was when Catholics were allowed to become MPs in 1829. In fact in Ireland this decision was accompanied by a repression of civil and political liberties. Even so, the fact that a Catholic could enter Parliament increased Irish national feeling.

But while this feeling was growing, Ireland suffered the worst disaster in its entire history. For three years, 1845, 1846 and 1847, the potato crop, which was the main food of the poor, failed. Since the beginning of the century, the population had risen quickly from five to eight million. In these three years 1.5 million (about 20 per cent) died from hunger. At the same time Ireland had enough wheat to feed the entire population, but it was grown for export to England by the mainly Protestant landowners. The government in London failed to realise the seriousness of the problem.

Many Irish people had little choice but to leave. At least a million left during these years, but many more followed during the rest of the century because of the great poverty in Ireland. Most settled in the United States. Between 1841 and 1920 almost five million settled there. Some went eastwards to the towns and cities of Britain. Many helped to build Britain's railways.



The Irish population has still not yet grown to the same level. Today it is less than five million (three million in the Republic of Ireland, 1.5 million in Northern Ireland), only a little more than half what it was in 1840. Emigration from Ireland continues.

The Irish who went to the United States did not forget the old country. Nor did they forgive Britain. By 1880 many Irish Americans were rich and powerful and were able to support the Irish freedom movement. They have had an influence on British policy in Ireland ever since.

Meanwhile, Charles Parnell, a Protestant Irish MP, demanded fuller rights for the Irish people, in particular the right to self-government. When most Irish were able to vote for the first time in 1885, eighty-six members of Parnell's Irish party were elected to Parliament. Most Liberals supported Parnell, but the Tories did not and Ireland did not gain the right to self-government, or "home rule", until thirty years later. But then Britain's war with Germany delayed it taking place, and by the time the war ended Irish nationalists had decided they could only win their freedom by fighting for it.